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Who Am I? Searching for Purpose and Meaning from Indian Perspectives to Modern Generation

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Abstract: A review article on the inspiring book, Shubhrangshu. (2019). *Zara's Witness: A soul journey into the nature of being*, highlights the philosophical quest for meaning and fulfilment from Indian traditions. It is a never-ending novel where a teenage girl is heroin, who searches for truth, permanence and values.

Keywords: Shubhrangshu Roy, Zara's Witness, Indian philosophy, Search for meaning, Indian world-view, Advaita.

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Roy, Shubhrangshu. (2019). *Zara's Witness: A soul journey into the nature of being*. New Delhi: Hay House India. pp.204 Rs 299. ISBN: 9789386832900

This elegant and inspiring book, *Zara's Witness*, is a living translation of classical Indian philosophy to the modern youth or Gen Z. It uses fantasy, myth, science, music, poetry and other symbolisms to evoke the depth and beauty of our inner consciousness, as represented by the Indian psyche. It tells the story of a teenager seeking wisdom for herself in her life journey from the Ganges to the forest to the city!

1. The Compelling Plot

With elegant prose, coupled with the sporadic poems, the book tries to share the classical wisdom of Upanishads and sacred texts with the modern youth absorbed by contemporary virtual reality and discotheques.

This book aptly dedicated to “the one within” is an ongoing search to find oneself in all its depth and breadth. It has as its Purva Paksha the following sections: “Song of Creation”; “Illusion of Identity”; “The Essence of Being.”

The last two sections, “Song of Creation Revisited” and “The End of Story: The Game Begins” are conversations with the higher self of the teenage Zara, the protagonist of the story, before she ascends to the sky to confront the one and only reality of her being – I am who thou art, or thou art who I am. They reverberate in us the classical *Aham Brahmasmi* (“I am Brahman) and *Tat Tvam Asi* (“That thou art”).

In this sense, this book evokes in us “Noting Stirs” and in this very process “Everything Happens.” That is how human beings experience life and the novel does the same.

The last section of the book, or after-conversation, is “a copyright blueprint of the equation for everything in the Universe” articulated as “the essence of this and that” (p. 13 and 191). The attentive reader

will be able to find “this equation” interspersed throughout the narrative. The concept of time and space, as measured by ancient seers, is elaborated at the end of the book (p. 13 and 197f.). Thus time is smoothly blended to life and narrative (Ricoeur 2009).

a. Learning from the Bosom of Nature

The teachers in this captivating novel are elements of nature. Froggy (the frog), Elly (the elephant), the Wind, Monk!ee, Thunderstorm, River, Koel (the sweet-singing bird), Hyena, Rhino, Peacock ridge, etc., impart lessons for Zara and accompany her in her life journey.

The book deploys several tools used in other crafts and science such as literature, poetry, theatre, classical Indian and Western music, cinema, and quantum computing to narrate Zara’s inner exploration (p. 12) to arrive at her inner self. So, it is from her close intimacy with nature that Zara acquires the wisdom to lead her meaningful and fulfilling life.

b. Answering the Perennial Question

This picturesque book is an attempt to answer the eternal human question: Who am I? That search of a teen “meanders along the course of a river to its final destination in the sky where both the river and the human spirit merge at the end of the journey to discover the one eternal truth revealed to mankind since time immemorial—universal love” (p. 11). This search is a perennial one found in the whole Indian philosophy right up to our own times. Shubhrangshu Roy makes a very successful effort to make this search accessible for Gen Z.

c. The Never-Ending Story

For Shubhrangshu Roy, the nature of Indian philosophy and the diverse aspirations of it “not only spirals upwards, i.e., it ascends from one story to another, but it is also essentially

recursive. Which is to say, it is never-ending and almost amounts to the same thing being told over and over again through shifts in the storytelling from generation to generation, from one millennium to another. In a sense, there is actually no end, no conclusion. The storyteller and the story can go on and on (203). This reminds us of the *Neverending Story* of the German writer Michael Ende (1993), who has written a similar story for children and teens. Like a never-ending story, the narrator becomes part of the story and the differences between the story and the hero become indistinguishable. Here the individual self, liberated from the illusion of identity, follows the cycles of life, death and rebirth together with the whole cosmic processes.

2. Some Significant Themes

This fascinating book contains very important lessons for life and articulates the classical Indian philosophy for the contemporary youth. In this section, we pick and choose randomly, some important themes, without ever claiming that we are making an exhaustive list.

a. Ongoing Discovery of the Inner Self

Most of the themes in this book are philosophically profound and can be traced to the Indian classics. The basic question Zara asks is: “Who am I?” and “Where did I come from?” “You come from, yourself, Zara,” (p. 161), answers the river “in celebration.” “But how did I come here?” Zara wondered aloud. The reply was enigmatic: “You came here riding time, Zara. Time, indeed, is your father,” said the river. And how did I come here riding time?” Zara asked again (Ricoeur 2009).

“Your desire of you rode time here,” said the river. “Those words were your desire to become something that expanded in time,” the river said as Zara waited for the answer. “Your desire illumined your senses with the colours of the rainbow, Zara, so that you could reach out to your higher self within, just as the tendrils of the plant reach out for sunlight. And that light generated heat. And that heat created

the germ of life in you that we call the seed. And that seed is what you ceded of yourself within you, splitting you into two.” (p. 162).

The river elaborates on time. “Time is the distance you covered for the idea of you to become you and, therefore, turn full circle (p. 163)”.

In this discovery of the true self, and the illusion of identity, Zara listens to a sweet song, “*Jo tu hai, so main hoon; jo main hoon, so tu hai!* (What you are, so am I; what I am, so are you!) repeatedly in the course of this story (pp. 31, 90, 166, 182). ‘Have faith in yourself, Zara’, said the voice from within the pool. No one here is bigger than you, nor is anyone smaller than you are. Not the ant, not the housefly, not the butterfly, not the dragonfly, not the grasshopper, not the frog, not the monitor lizard, and, least of all, not the elephant. Come look again, little Zara, neither is there any joy for you around this place nor is there any sorrow . . . what you are, little Zara, so I am; what I am, so you are.” (p. 25). Precisely herein discerns the author the advaitic insight of the Indian tradition. Here the suggestion of Rhino to Zara is significant: “Remembah, whateva you do, whereva you go, you do it for your own good. Revel in the creation of your Universe. Live in exuberance, Zara.” That’s well said, Rhi!noo. replied Zara. “I am the creator of my Universe indeed. That’s for certain” (p. 114).

Laughingly the river adds: “I am what you are. Better still, I am what you perceive I am. Right now, dear Zara, you perceive me as . . . (p. 30)”. So, there is an intimate relationship between Zara and the river. The advaitic insight is that they are both one (Pandikattu 2001)!

In this manner, the search for the inner self, the real self, goes on. “Do not rest your eyes on what you see around. Do not seek the external manifestation of what really is within. Seek the

silence of your soul, seek the wisdom of your heart,” the monitor lizard strutted about, inspecting and instructing (p. 34). To realise this inner self, cleansing of one’s mind is essential. “Come, lemme cleanse your minds ... For when I am one with myself within, I rid myself of the dilemmas of my mind (p. 37).”

Then we realise that we are the universe. “Make the entire Universe your own. The river, the fish, the birds, the worms, the reptiles and all. And to make them your own, renounce the image you have of yourself, the river flowed on (p. 39).”

Realising the essence of everything leads to the same effect. “When you peel an onion to its end, you are only left with its essence. That essence alone is you. When you feel the essence, you absorb everything (p. 176).” Feeling the essence means giving up the ego or the false sense of identity. “The river helps you know yourself. Kill the I in you every day, kill all that you feel is yours (p. 59).”

The infinity of self: When you reach this essence and make the entire universe your own, you recognise the Infinity of your own self. “You taught me to fear the vastness of your expanse, which is also the vastness of my imagination. You taught me to fear the infinity of self. And then, you taught me to overcome my fear by submerging myself in my reflection in you” (p. 86), which is the infinity of one’s own self.

b. Continuing Search for Wisdom

The story of Zara is itself a journey, a journey towards the discovery of meaning and wisdom. Enclosed in a plasma bubble, Zara lands on the bank of the Ganges from the tongue of the glacier. She begins her life on the riverbank where the eternal question of “Who am I?” drives her on a journey from the forest to the city where she reckons that she can find her purpose. In her challenging and troublesome voyage, she experiences personal loss and materialistic pleasures which lifts her up to a higher level of consciousness.

The journey of life: When Zara decides to leave the forest and travel to the city, the hyena advises her, “The forest is irrelevant to your journey. You have to tackle the trees that stand in your way, instead. Your desire to reach the city must not get distorted by your fear, or else, you will lose yourself trapped in the forest, unable to reach your journey’s end.” (p. 112)

The author Roy himself adds. “I felt that Zara’s journey to the sky (to the high heavens, as it were) and what happens thereafter, should be left as an open-ended happily ever after (p. 203).

Purpose and Wisdom: This novel is a philosophical fantasy capturing the journey of a girl – from infancy to adulthood seeking the purpose of her life. “That search meanders along the course of a river to its final destination in the sky where both the river and the human spirit merge at the end of the journey to discover the one eternal truth revealed to mankind since time immemorial—universal love.” (p. 11)

In doing so, the writer Roy “combines the wisdom of the spiritual master with over 5,000 years of Vedic expositions in a series of hallucinatory journeys that deliver the core” (p.11) wisdom of the Indian traditions, for balanced global development.

This wisdom the teen acquires is one that comforts and smoothens the others. “The river feels the presence of visitors, but doesn’t drown in their joy or sorrow; It ought to be the same with your mind that harbours both the good and the evil (p. 67).” The same river avers: “It’s only the wise, like that giant banyan by my western bank, who actually soaks my water and give comfort to one and all (pp. 69-70).”

This profound experience of wisdom is available to everyone from everywhere. “And that’s exactly how each of us, at every level of awareness, discover that every creature here is a

gatekeeper of wisdom. We all draw our arrogance from access control to the ultimate wisdom that really seems beyond our individual grasp,” the grasshopper said (p. 41).

Once we acquire this wisdom, we will use it for the common or collective good. After attaining the power of our knowledge, “wise travellers use their knowledge to read the past and interpret what they see around to chart their future path (p. 112).”

c. Existential Predicament: Suffering and Death

That there is so much suffering in our lives is self-evident. The hyena gives almost the Buddhist precept through a hymn” “Thoughts lead to affirmation, Affirmation to desire, Desire leads to thirst, Thirst to craving (p.113).” He gives a trick to live in this world of suffering and affliction. “The trick is to achieve without action, to speak without a word (p. 113).” The solution to the sorrows of life has to be sought within. “Your sorrow comes from within. Solve your sorrows within. Remember, there is no joy in the material things of life. The treasure lies buried someplace else (p. 121).”

When Zara experiences the loss of her friend Elly, the elephant, she is totally lost. “I understand that and respect your sentiments, Zaru [nickname for Zara]. But I must also tell you that it’s essential for you to experience everything in life, even a sense of loss. You must learn when not to jump the threshold. And this moment is your test of time,” (p. 126) the west wind comforted her.

Paradoxical Life: Suffering highlights the predicaments and paradoxes of our life. “That’s the nature of life. Growth gives way to decay. And out of decay, new life is born,” (p. 121). The author elaborates, “Whenever I chased joy, I drowned myself in tears,” (p. 121).

Nothingness: The paradoxical nature of life can be seen in Zara’s experience of nothingness (*sunyata*) as a whole (fullness). “And so, in the flutter of an eyelid, Zara was reduced to Z.E.R.O., at which

point, she let out a primordial scream: “I aaaaaaaaam Nothing!” And that, indeed, was the moment when her self became infinite in the great, and in the small, everlasting and changeless, the source of life, unborn, without the body and mind (p. 145).”

Roy elaborates in poetry: “From Nothing arises Consciousness .../That arousal is Movement/ This Movement is Reverberation/ That Reverberation is Energy/ This Energy is Power/ That Power is the Basis of Attraction? This Attraction is the basis of all Creation? That Creation is the Reverberation of Something? That appears as Nothing? This Nothing is the Whole (p. 146).”

d. The Solutions: Freedom, Knowledge and Love

The way out of suffering and the paradoxes of life is diverse. Some of the elements that I can trace in the novel are as follows:

Living the Now: Even though the novel, following Indian philosophical traits encourages acquiring knowledge, it makes it clear. “There’s bliss neither in knowledge nor in dedication. What’s there is there in you. Enjoy the moment (p. 121).” This Buddhist insight is central to understanding how Roy deals with the richness, diversity and complexity of life. “Live in the present, Zaru. Live now!” (p. 139) the west wind also pleads with Zara.

This enables one to enjoy life and experience the things of this world like a bouquet. “Look around. Not a single soul in this forest is perfect. Some can run, others can fly, while others can jump or swim. But we all are here together to make the forest what it really is. Be part of the bouquet, Zara (p. 123).” Though none of us are ideal of perfect, together we can make it livable, though we are not perfect or ideal.

For this purpose, a healthy and meaningful way of coping with our own emotions is vital. In our search for meaningful life we cannot allow ourselves to be blackmailed by our own emotions. “A healthy person, Zaru,” the wind went on, “has all the emotions, all the qualities, but doesn’t allow herself to be blackmailed by them. Be alert, Zaru.” Similarly, when Zara is encouraged to cultivate friendship, she is warned from falling in love. “You are weak, he is strong, Every friendship has a purpose. Don’t fall in love (p. 134).” This is because falling in love is being blackmailed by emotions.

The answer is simple and straightforward: “Just surrender oversell as a log to the will of time and the artisan will sculpt you into shape,” (p. 128) the west wind said before blowing away.

Freedom: When we surrender unconditionally to the larger reality that is very much part of us, without being blackmailed by emotions, we attain freedom. “Retain your freedom, Zaru,” the west wind said. Don’t rest your mind on the objects around . . . on the body . . . on the person. Unshackle yourself, Zaru, lose your sense of the body (p. 135)”

“Yes, she’s [koel, the bird] entirely free, Zaru. And that freedom gives her such a lovely voice. If you hear them well, Zaru, no two birds in the forest sing the same. Each has her distinct voice. And yet, they all sing well because they all are free (p. 135).” But the beautiful peacock is “trapped in the image of his own beauty to be really free (p. 136).”

For Zara and us the path of freedom leads to fulfilment. “Just empty yourself within. Never be neither here nor there. Be either here or there. Be either in the city or the forest. Don’t keep standing at the crossroads forever. That, Zaru, is the essence of being (p. 136).”

Roy explains: “This is to say that when IOU Nothing, I am Free. This Freedom, therefore, is Virtual Reality. That Freedom is also Real because this Me that is Virtual is also that Me that is Real (p. 149).”

Knowledge: Another means of our own fulfilment is acquiring genuine knowledge. It is easy to obtain. “Just observe, Zaru, soak in the beauty of the moment to which you now belong, that’s knowledge,” (p. 141). There is a metaphysical basis for it. “That Universal is Knowledge This Knowledge of I resides in You. That Knowledge is what I Need. This Need is what IOU. That that IOU is the Trinity of Being (p. 147).”

Loving the Whole Universe: Another very significant way of achieving fulfilment is reaching out to the other and loving everything. Roy explains poetically: “This Creation leads to Preservation/ That Preservation leads to Ownership/ This Ownership between Two results from Ownership of One by the Other? . . . /And that, Zara, is the essence of Love (p. 158).”

“Keep looking, Zaru,” the west wind said in a calm, collected manner. “Love others as you would love yourself. But delink your emotions from physical attachment (p. 138).” As noted earlier, love should be disconnected from emotions or attachments. Such love gives you an abundance of power. If you yield to the power it can become a monster! “When you know that you are actually the monster of your own power, you rest in humility and in love of all (p. 51),” the river urged Zara.

Widening our vision: Once we reach out freely to others through knowledge and love, we become joyful and equanimous. “That’s good. You look cheerful again. Practice equanimity, Zaru, and don’t harbour a doubt (p. 137).”

In this way, Roy challenges us to widen our vision about ourselves and reality. After dissolving the illusion of identity, one becomes integrated with the other. “Call me whatever you will, *Jo tu hai, so main hoon.*” (“What you are, I am) (p. 94).

That is why the elephant rambles: “To the creature with limited vision, I might appear, at once, a log; at others, a pillar or two

or four; sometimes, a rope or even a barrel. But to the one with complete vision, I am what I really am, an elephant (p. 96).”

3. Experiencing Bliss

Finally, the goal and purpose of life is pictured as attaining absolute joy or bliss. This joy begins with the food we eat and moves on to experience the bliss of life in its entirety!

a. Beginning with the Food

After having travelled the assiduous journey, Zara’s tale invites us to experience the bliss that is our life itself. The novel delves into the simple and specific pleasure of food and eating. Relying on the Indian insight, “*sarvam annam*” (everything is food), Zara listens attentively, as she leaves the forest and reaches the city. “From food are creatures, that dwell on earth, produced; by food they live and again into it, they finally pass,” Nigella El (“I am the real me,” said the lady, but they call me Nigella El) (p. 175).

She elaborates on this profound truth. “Ah food! Well, I am food! I am food, I am food; I am the eater of food! I am the eater of food, I am the eater of food,” said Nigella. “Food, Zara, is the highest state of being,” she went on, “for truly life is food (p. 175).”

Food is good and it is everything. And it leads to higher bliss. “It is the infinite space of your heart, Zara, the dwelling of your soul. It is free from hunger, free from thirst, free from old age, free from death, and free from grief (p. 174),” Zara heard a husky feminine voice from across the oven.

b. Bliss of Being Human

Towards the end of her journey, Zara sings: “Floating beyond the horizon of reality,/ On a carpet of smoke,/ I see life abound in joy./ It’s a world of goodness, beyond grasp./ I leave my world far behind/ Flying over the clouds/ To a magical place – I find eternal joy.” (p. 187)

This leads to her feeling of calmness and completion. “I have arrived! Calmness manifest, That’s I. Countless arms rising high: “Om Shanti!” In unbounded joy, I find completion,” (p. 143). Here the turtle’s advice to Zara is relevant: “Bliss that comes and never goes away is bliss” (p. 127). The contribution of the little ant is remarkable: “When no desire, no movement in this world of yours arouses your passion, your energy, then, is dormant. There is no distress. There is no pain. And that state of emptiness, when there is no passion, no pain, no joy, is the state of bliss.” (p. 76)

The condition to attain this bliss is willing renunciation (p. 127) and self-control. “Different creatures do different things to master their Universe. In the end, we need self-control to be happy at all times, not sad (p. 78).” In such a situation fear evaporates. “There’s nothing to fear when you are in love. There’s nothing to fear when you are not in hate. There’s nothing to fear when you have nothing to prove (p. 81).”

At the beginning of her journey, Zara asked. “All this sounds too complicated for my age. Is this Universe really an illusion of my mind? Right now, I can dance with the glowworms on the promenade, climb up the Peacock Ridge tomorrow, and pick up those gemstones one day. And some time, when I grow up, I can even lose myself in the dazzle of the city lights to the applause of a thousand hands. The stars?” (p. 50). After her tedious journey, she realises the meaning of life.

I wish that Zara’s Witness also becomes a classic giving purpose, meaning and wisdom to today’s Gen Z. I wish that Indian philosophy with its liberative and humanistic vision discovers its valuable roots and make it relevant to the contemporary women and men.

Destruction and suffering are necessary parts of life through which we attain bliss. “That Destruction is Liberation. This, then, is the essence of the Universe, trapped within the bubble in a cycle of give and take, of good and bad, fear and hope, joy and sorrow, love and hate, peace and war (p. 187).” So at the end, she realises the paradox: “And in that complete collapse, life is liberated. And that life is *sva*. And from that *sva* pours forth *ha!* the seed of love (p. 188).” This is the *Svaha*, the denouement at the end of the prayerful mantra. That is the bliss of being human, in intimate connection with the whole universe (Pandikattu 2004).

Conclusion

Zara's Witness is a philosophical fantasy where Zara's life is explored in terms of human needs for fulfilment, happiness, and spiritual liberation. This book can be compared to two classic novels of the same genre. In *Siddhartha: An Indian tale*, the German novelist Herman Hesse (2007) explores the spiritual journey and search for the meaning of a young man by the same name during the time of the Gautama Buddha. In *Sophie's World: A novel about the history of philosophy*, a novel by Norwegian writer Jostein Gaarder (2012), the young teenager Sophie Amundsen is introduced to the history of philosophy through riddles, puzzles, symbols and the genre of story-telling, like Zara.

Like the two books mentioned above, I wish that *Zara's Witness* also becomes a classic giving purpose, meaning and wisdom to today's Gen Z. I wish that Indian philosophy with its liberative and humanistic vision discovers its valuable roots and make it relevant to the contemporary women and men. May we rediscover the depth and significance of “the Indian Ending” that the British historian Arnold Toynbee referred to! A fascinating novel that speaks of virtual reality, Gen Z, space warping, quantum mechanics and discotheque in the same breath as Indian philosophy can achieve it!

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